DATELINE: #102 MOUNT VERNON, VIRGINIA AUGUST 4, 1976
ALINA ZERANSKI

GENTLE CUSTODIANS OF A SHRINE
(INSERTS IN TAPE LIBRARY)

ANNCR: DATELINE: MOUNT VERNON, VIRGINIA -- PICTURES IN SOUND OF PEOPLE, PLACES AND EVENTS HERE IN THE UNITED STATES -- BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE VOICE OF AMERICA EACH WEEK (AT THIS TIME). TODAY, A REPORT PREPARED BY ALINA ZERANSKI ON A VISIT WITH A GROUP OF LADIES DEDICATED TO THE CARE OF THE HOME OF A NATIONAL HERO.

NARR: THE CONFERENCE ROOM IS FILLED WITH EXQUISITE PERIOD FURNITURE IN THE STYLE THAT GEORGE WASHINGTON CHOSE FOR HIS HOME. THE GROUP OF LADIES WHO OWN AND CARE FOR MOUNT VERNON, THE LOVELY VIRGINIA ESTATE WHERE WASHINGTON LIVED, HAVE RECREATED, EVEN IN THE ADMINISTRATIVE BUILDING THE ATMOSPHERE OF A PROSPEROUS 18TH CENTURY AMERICAN PLANTATION.

THE WHITE RAMBLING HOME STANDS ON A HILL, OFFERING A MAGNIFICENT VIEW ON THE POTOMAC RIVER AND GENTLY SLOPING GARDENS. BUT BEFORE THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION BOUGHT THE ESTATE, ITS PRESERVATION SEEMED QUESTIONABLE.

WASHINGTON FREED ALL HIS SLAVES IN HIS WILL AND DIVIDED THE LAND AMONG SEVERAL RELATIVES. THERE WAS NO INCOME TO SUPPORT THE MANOR. SUBSEQUENT OWNERS LET IT FALL INTO TERRIBLE DISREPAIR. AND IN THE MIDDLE OF THE 19TH CENTURY -- FIFTY YEARS AFTER WASHINGTON'S DEATH -- HIS GREAT-GRANDNEPHEW MADE FRANTIC EFFORTS TO FIND A GROUP THAT WOULD TAKE OVER THE RESPONSIBILITY.

TAPE: CUT ONE -- COOKE

"THE LAST OWNER OFFERED THIS PROPERTY, WHICH WAS VERY RUN DOWN,..ALL THE BUILDINGS AND TWO HUNDRED ACRES (80 HECTARES) OF THE PROPERTY THAT ONCE CONSISTED OF EIGHT THOUSAND ACRES, (3200 HECTARES) TO THE U.S. GOVERNMENT, WHICH REFUSED TO BUY IT. HE THEN OFFERED IT TO THE STATE OF VIRGINIA, AND THE STATE OF VIRGINIA WAS NOT PARTICULARLY INTERESTED AND ALSO REFUSED TO BUY IT. TWO HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS WAS A GREAT DEAL OF MONEY IN THE 1850S."

NARR: THAT WAS ELIZABETH COOKE, -- SHE'S CALLED MADAME REGENT -- SHE'S IN CHARGE OF MOUNT VERNON. SHE HEADS A GROUP OF VICE REGENTS, EACH REPRESENTING A DIFFERENT STATE. THE BOARD FILLS VACANCIES WITH WOMEN FROM DIFFERENT STATES, SO EVERY PART OF THE COUNTRY GETS REPRESENTATION IN TURN. LADIES CHOSEN FOR THIS DISTINCTION ARE ALL PROMINENT IN PATRIOTIC ORGANIZATIONS. EACH VICE REGENT SERVES AS LONG AS SHE CAN. MRS. COOKE REPRESENTED NEW JERSEY FOR THIRTY YEARS BEFORE SHE WAS ELECTED REGENT. SHE LOOKS WARMLY AT THE PORTRAIT OF THE WOMAN WHO FIRST TOOK OVER THE CARE OF MOUNT VERNON FROM WASHINGTON'S DESPERATE DESCENDANT.

TAPE: CUT TWO -- COOKE

"AND THEN ALONG CAME MISS ANN PAMELA CUNNINGHAM, A VERY WONDERFUL YOUNG WOMAN WHO HAD BEEN INJURED IN HER TEENS BY A FALL FROM A HORSE AND SO WAS MORE OR LESS AN INVALID...AND, PERHAPS, IF IT HAD NOT BEEN FOR THIS ACCIDENT...SHE WOULD HAVE GOTTEN MARRIED YOUNG AND HAD A FAMILY AND BEEN A GRACIOUS MISTRESS OF A PLANTATION. SHE WOULD NOT HAVE HAD THE TIME TO GIVE TO A WONDERFUL PROJECT GEARED TO THE IDEA THAT THE WOMEN OF AMERICA WOULD BUY MOUNT VERNON AND SAVE IT, FIRST REPAIR AND RESTORE IT, AND THEN KEEP IT AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE TO WHAT GEORGE WASHINGTON HAD HERE WHEN HE LIVED IN MOUNT VERNON, WHICH HE DEARLY LOVED."

NARR: IN 1853, PAMELA ANN CUNNINGHAM WROTE A LETTER TO A SOUTH CAROLINA PAPER SEEKING WOMEN WHO WOULD HELP HER TO RAISE MONEY FOR MOUNT VERNON. THREE YEARS LATER, VIRGINIA LAWYERS WERE AGHAST WHEN A GROUP OF FEMALES, WISHING TO PURCHASE WASHINGTON'S ESTATE, ASKED TO BECOME INCORPORATED. WOMEN DIDN'T DO THINGS LIKE THAT IN THOSE DAYS.

TAPE: CUT THREE -- COOKE

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"SHE WAS A VERY ABLE WOMAN, AND SHE COULD CHANNEL ALL HER TALENTS AND ALL HER ENERGY INTO THIS ONE PROJECT. WOMEN WERE SO POORLY REGARDED IN THOSE DAYS THAT A WOMAN COULD NOT OWN PROPERTY... THIS WAS A COMPLETELY NOVEL IDEA, TO FORM AN ASSOCIATION OF WOMEN. THIS IS THE FIRST PATRIOTIC SOCIETY FOR WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES... SHE HAD A GREAT VISION, SHE SOON FORESAW THAT NOT JUST SOUTH CAROLINA OR VIRGINIA WAS SO CONCERNED WITH THE FATHER OF THIS COUNTRY, BUT THAT GEORGE WASHINGTON BELONGED TO THE NATION. AND SHE WAS ABLE TO APPOINT ONE WOMAN IN EVERY ONE OF THE (THEN) 35 STATES OF THE UNION... WHO WAS WILLING TO GO AND RAISE MONEY IN HER OWN STATE TO BUY THIS PROPERTY."

NARR: AT THAT TIME, THE MANSION'S CEILINGS WERE FALLING, THE WINDOWS WERE BROKEN, THE ROOF LEAKED, THE GARDEN WAS A WRECK. THERE WAS NOT A SINGLE PIECE OF FURNITURE. THE LADIES STARTED LOOKING FOR ORIGINAL FURNISHINGS THAT ONCE BELONGED TO WASHINGTON. WHATEVER THEY COULD NOT RECOVER WAS REPLACED WITH PIECES FROM THE SAME PERIOD.

TAPE: CUT FOUR -- COOKE

"IN 1859, WE WERE ABLE TO TAKE OVER MOUNT VERNON, AND WE HAVE RUN IT EVER SINCE. IT IS A NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATION. THE MEMBERS OF THE ASSOCIATION SERVE WITHOUT PAY. IT IS CONSIDERED A GREAT HONOR TO BE A MEMBER AND CERTAINLY TO BE THE REGENT COUNTS, WITH THE MANY PRIVILEGES, BUT THERE ARE ALSO MANY RESPONSIBILITIES."

NARR: ABOUT ONE MILLION VISITORS PASS THROUGH MOUNT VERNON EVERY YEAR. ROYALTY AND HEADS OF STATE VISITING WASHINGTON, ONLY 24 KILOMETERS AWAY, OFTEN STOP AT THE HOME OF THE FOUNDER OF THE UNION. MADAME REGENT IS A GRACIOUS HOSTESS. HER DUTIES TAKE HER TO MOUNT VERNON SEVERAL TIMES A MONTH, ALTHOUGH SHE HAS NINETY PAID STAFF MEMBERS TO HELP HER. THE ESTATE IS SUPPORTED BY THE VISITORS' ADMISSION FEES AND OCCASIONAL DONATIONS. AND FOR THE DEDICATED WOMEN WHO PRESERVE HIS HOME, GEORGE WASHINGTON IS A LIVING PRESENCE. THEY HAVE MADE MOUNT VERNON NOT INTO A MONUMENT OR A MUSEUM, BUT A HOME. AND WHEN YOU VISIT THERE, YOU HAVE THE FEELING THAT HE HAS JUST STEPPED OUT -- FOR A MOMENT.

ANNCR: THIS HAS BEEN DATELINE: MOUNT VERNON, VIRGINIA -- PICTURES IN SOUND OF PEOPLE, PLACES AND EVENTS HERE IN THE UNITED STATES, BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE VOICE OF AMERICA EACH WEEK (AT THIS TIME). TODAY, YOU HEARD ABOUT THE MOUNT VERNON LADIES' ASSOCIATION. NEXT _____ ANOTHER DATELINE.

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